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ABSTRACT

Earlier research investigating the relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness found that physically attractive females were more assertive than other females. To investigate this relationship further and to broaden the scope of the study, 69 students were videotaped in groups of five to ten while responding to open-ended discussion questions. Following the discussion, subjects completed a self-report assertiveness inventory, the College Self-Expression Scale. Judges independently rated subjects' physical attractiveness on a 12-point Likert scale. These ratings were correlated with the behavioral measures of volume, order of speaking, and duration of speaking during the videotaped discussions. An analysis of the results showed a strong relationship between physical attractiveness and the duration of speaking, with physically attractive subjects speaking for a shorter time. In addition, physically attractive subjects tended to speak sooner. When separated by sex, this relationship held for females, but not for males. (Author/BL)

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# ASSERTIVENESS AND PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

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## Abstract

Jackson and Huston (1975) found that attractive females were more assertive than unattractive females. However, there were some shortcomings in their methodology: (a) only one measurement of assertiveness was used, (b) this behavioral measurement of assertiveness may have been confounded by frustration of the subjects, (c) only female subjects were used, (d) subjects represented only the extreme categories of physical attractiveness, and (e) an unrefined method of obtaining subjects to represent physical attractiveness categories was used.

The present study examined the relationship between assertiveness and physical attractiveness in an effort to address these shortcomings. Sixty-nine male and female undergraduates were videotaped in groups of five to ten while responding to an open-ended discussion question. Following the discussion, subjects completed a self-report assertiveness inventory (College Self-Expression Scale). Judges independently rated subjects' physical attractiveness on a twelve point Likert scale. These ratings were correlated with the behavioral measures of order of speaking, duration of speaking, and volume of speech during the videotaped discussion. Additionally, subjects were rated by judges on global assertiveness.

Results indicated a strong relationship between physical attractiveness and the duration of speaking ($r=-.41$), with physically attractive subjects speaking for a shorter time. Additionally, physically attractive subjects tended to speak sooner ($r=-.27$). When separated by sex, this relationship held for females but not for males. No other correlations were significant although several interesting trends were noted. Thus, the present study supported and extended the findings of previous research. Possible reasons for sex differences were explored.

# Assertiveness and Physical Attractiveness

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Several years ago, Jackson and Huston (1975) investigated the relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness. They found that (a) that attractive females were more assertive on a behavioral measurement that involved correcting the impoliteness of the experimenter, and (b) a nonsignificant tendency for physically attractive females to score higher on assertiveness using the Borgotta self-report measure. There has been no published research investigating the relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness before or since 1975, and some additional investigation is warranted.

Although the Jackson and Huston (1975) publication obviously contributed to an understanding of the relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness, the authors criticize their own study by suggesting the possibility that "the questionnaire responses (of assertiveness) were more a function of the immediate situation than an indication of relatively enduring personality characteristics" (p. 83). Although the authors do not specify the aspect of the situation that might have influenced the assertiveness questionnaire responses, two possibilities are frustration and anger. The subjects are exposed to a condition that probably frustrated and perhaps angered them, immediately prior to the completion of the questionnaire. The design of the Jackson and Huston (1975) study required that after giving instructions, the experimenter begin to hand the questionnaire to the subjects, and then take the questionnaire away from the subject in the process of leaving to talk with a confederate who "interrupted" the session. The experimenter placed the questionnaire on a table 6 feet from the subject, and began talking with the confederate. The behavioral measure of assertiveness was the latency of responding to the experimenter's impoliteness. Although this appears to be a reasonable behavioral measurement of one dimension of

assertiveness, the problem is that immediately following this impoliteness, the subjects completed the assertiveness questionnaires. Thus, frustration, anger, or some similar emotional reaction may be a confounding variable in the Jackson and Huston design.

The present study attempted to eliminate the possible confounding variables of frustration and anger by altering the research design, and making some meaningful improvements: (a) Both male and female subjects were used, (b) subjects of varying levels of physical attractiveness were used, and (c) a different type of assertiveness was measured.

## Method

Twenty-one male, and 41 female subjects were recruited from undergraduate psychology and sociology classes. Eight sessions were conducted, with from five to ten subjects in each mixed-sex group. Subjects were asked to take one of ten seats in a designated area, and then informed by the experimenter that the first part of the study involved the subjects giving their opinion in response to a discussion question. The question was: "Was John Hinkley insane when he shot President Reagan? Why or why not?" It was intended to be an ambiguous question about which there is considerable disagreement. If some of the subjects had not spoken, after 15 seconds of silence the experimenter indicated that he would now like to hear from those who had not spoken. The subjects were videotaped, and their comments allowed the measurements of (a) order of speaking, (b) duration of speaking, (c) volume of speech, and (d) global assertiveness.

Following the subjects' verbal responses to the question, they were instructed individually to look at the camera and indicate their major and occupational plans after graduation. The camera would then zoom in on each subject for later use in evaluation of physical attractiveness. Finally, subjects were asked to complete the College Self-Expression Scale to provide a self-report assertiveness measurement. The subjects were then allowed to leave, and debriefed later in writing.

Two judges, 1 female and 1 male, evaluated each videotaped subject on a 12 point scale, ranging from very unattractive to very attractive. Two different judges were used to evaluate each subject's response to the discussion question on a 12 point global assertiveness scale, ranging from very unassertive to very assertive. Other measurements of the discussion situation included

order of speaking, number of seconds of speaking, and a rough average volume of speech in decibels.

## Results

Pearson correlation coefficients were used to determine the relationships between the relevant variables. When combining males and females in the analysis, there was a relatively strong relationship between physical attractiveness and duration of speaking, with higher physically attractive subjects speaking for a shorter duration ($r = -.41$, $df = 1,60$, $p<.001$). In addition, the more physically attractive subjects tended to speak sooner than the less physically attractive subjects ($r = -.27$, $df = 1,60$, $p<.04$). These data also showed a nonsignificant trend that the more physically attractive subjects scored higher on assertiveness using the self-report measure ($r = .20$, $df = 1,67$, $p<.10$).

The analysis of the data from females is generally similar to the above findings. The more physically attractive females tend to speak for a shorter duration than the less attractive females ($r = -.43$, $df = 1,39$, $p< .005$). A somewhat stronger relationship as compared with the analysis for all subjects is revealed between physical attractiveness and order of speaking, with the physically attractive females tending to speak sooner than the less physically attractive females ($r = -.37$, $df = 1,39$, $p<.02$).

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Table 1 about here

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When male subjects were used in the analysis, only one noteworthy relationship appears: physically attractive males tend to speak for a shorter duration than those who are less physically attractive ($r = -.40$, $df = 1,19$, $p<.08$), and even this relationship does not attain the $p<.05$ level of significance. Interestingly, for the males there is no relationship between physical attractiveness and order of speaking ($r = -.08$), or self-reported assertiveness ($r = .04$). Table I presents a summary of all correlations obtained.

## Discussion

The present study has attempted to supplement previous research on physical attractiveness and assertiveness by testing the relationship between these two concepts using male and female

subjects, using a continuum of physical attractiveness, and using a substantially different behavioral measure of assertiveness. Although these changes were made in the present study, the findings from this study were generally similar to the findings of Jackson and Huston (1975): (a) there were noteworthy relationships between physical attractiveness and the behavioral measurement of assertiveness, and (b) there was only a suggestion of a relationship (not statistically significant at the traditional level) between physical attractiveness and a self-report assertiveness questionnaire.

Although the present study supports the findings of the Jackson and Huston study, it also provides important additional information. The finding that physically attractive subjects spoke for a shorter period of time is intriguing. On the surface, one might predict that an assertive person would speak for a longer period of time than an unassertive person. However, a stronger argument would seem to be that people who are assertive have greater confidence in themselves, and feel less of a need to justify their opinion (as compared with unassertive people). In a discussion situation, assertive people may state their opinion and supply little explanation, whereas unassertive people may spend some time trying to explain the reasons behind their opinion.

The inclusion of males in the present study clearly indicates a difference between male and female subjects in terms of the relationship between physical attractiveness and order of speaking, and suggests a difference between males and females when relating physical attractiveness and self-reported assertiveness. Whereas for female subjects there was a relationship, for males there was no relationship. Although there was the suggestion of a relationship for females between physical attractiveness and self-reported assertiveness, there was no relationship for males. Since the relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness established in the Jackson and Huston (1975) study was determined by using only female subjects, and since in the present study similar relationships exist for females but not for males, one might conclude that females evidence more of a relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness than males.

Perhaps this sex-based relationship exists because women have traditionally invested more of their self concept in their physical appearance than males. Whereas men have traditionally had many avenues for building self-esteem open to them (e.g., sports, educational attainment,

occupation), women have been traditionally more restricted, and may have learned to depend on physical attractiveness more than men. Although additional research is necessary, the findings from the present study do suggest a difference between males and females regarding this relationship.

A second contribution distinct from the Jackson and Huston (1975) study is the use of a continuum of physical attractiveness. The present study found such an overall relationship between physical attractiveness and some measures of assertiveness, thereby indicating that the relationship exists for varying levels of the variables, not merely the end points.

A third unique contribution of the present research is the use of a totally different behavioral measurement of assertiveness. Whereas the behavioral measurement of the Jackson and Huston (1975) study involved responding to the impoliteness of the experimenter, the present research measured assertiveness in a discussion situation. The present research strengthens confidence in the Jackson and Huston finding about behavioral assertiveness, and broadens the scope of types of assertiveness that are related to physical attractiveness.

This research has shown that the relationship between physical attractiveness and assertiveness is apparently different for females as compared with males, with females showing a stronger relationship. This research has also shown that the relationship varies, depending on the particular assertiveness component being measured. Future investigation should focus on the identification of factors that mediate the sex differences found in this study.

## Reference

Jackson, D.J., & Huston, T.L. Physical attractiveness and assertiveness. The Journal of Social Psychology, 1975, 96, 79-84.

Table 1

Relationship between Physical Attractiveness and Assertiveness Measures

| Group | Speaking Order | Speaking Duration | Speech Volume | Global Assert. | Self-Rep Assert. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Subjects | -.27* | -.41** | .17 | .06 | .20 |
| Males | -.08 | -.40 | .08 | .16 | .04 |
| Females | -.37* | -.43** | .23 | .02 | .22 |

*$p<.05$

**$p<.01$